DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 334 579 CS 212 941

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TITLE Obscured by Metaphor: "Community" vs. the Reality of a Writing Class.
PUB DATE 22 Mar 91
NOTE 15p.; Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the Conference on College Composition and Communication (42nd, Boston, MA, March 21-23, 1991).
PUB TYPE Speeches/Conference Papers (150) -- Reports - Research/Technical (143)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS Case Studies; *Classroom Environment; Classroom Research; Conflict; Higher Education; Language Research; *Language Role; *Language Usage; *Metaphors; Peer Acceptance; Writing Teachers
IDENTIFIERS Composition Theory; Teacher Researchers

ABSTRACT

A case study analyzed the function of language (how language was being used and for what purposes) in a composition classroom from a systemic linguistic perspective. The subject was a young woman of Iranian-Macedonian descent and the researcher was the subject's composition teacher. The study focused on the subject's use of metaphor in relation to communal uses of metaphor in the classroom. Three levels of analysis (micro, intermediate, and macro) were used, analyzing: (1) grammatical-semantic metaphor in the subject's language; (2) lexical metaphor in the subject's texts; and (3) lexico-semantic metaphor as it appeared in communal texts. The subjects' texts--both spoken and written--were not well-received in the classroom, and she herself defined herself as an outcast. Results indicated that the subject did not fit into the classroom "community" because she was deploying the same set of linguistic resources--metaphors--in ways that did not mesh neatly with the ways most students were deploying metaphorical uses of language. Findings suggest that the commonly accepted notion of "community" and the notion of resistance fail to explain why some students do well in composition classrooms and why some do not. Students should be taught that conflict is constitutive, normal, and necessary; it explains the dynamism of language and meaning, and it is inherent in social groups. Findings also suggest that composition teachers should conceptualize their classrooms not as communities but as "collectivities" and begin to listen actively for the metaphors students offer to define themselves as a group-in-process. (RS)

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22 March 1991

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Obscured by Metaphor:
"Community" vs. The Reality of A Writing Class

The notion of the *language community* has gained popular acceptance in the field of composition theory and pedagogy. First used by linguists to reflect the fact that language-use is never decontextualized, teachers of reading and writing have translated the term *community* into a metaphor for learning. Participants in the writing-across-the-curriculum movement have found the metaphor especially useful. I, for example, have invited students to research the rules and conventions of the various academic *communities* they anticipate joining--such as natural resources, political science, or history. I have also invited them to conceptualize our classroom activities as enactments of the kinds of processes the disciplines have engaged in historically. That is, the composition classroom is a *community*--akin to academic *communities*. We collaboratively form rules and conventions for the making of meaning, the construction of oral and written texts. We develop a common language to use in pursuit of common goals. This common language is arrived at through negotiation, compromise, and consensus. I have used this metaphor of *community* to facilitate my students' understanding of the social construction of meaning. Not without problems.

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The concept of the *language community* is essentially a normative one. Composition instructors do understand that when writers diverge from approved usages--the conventions and rules--of *language communities*, misunderstandings occur. Further, academic success depends on the mastery of sanctioned ways of speaking and writing. Serious consequences. Translated into a metaphor for

learning in the composition classroom, however, the notion of *language community* can become a rather benign concept. Without recourse to the ideoclastic agenda fully intended by the sociolinguists who made the phrase *language community* professionally popular, humanistic composition instructors who use the metaphor can submerge the very serious consequences of deviation from *community* norms and rules.

Some theorists, in fact, have come to realize some of the problems with the uncritical use of *community* metaphor in the classroom. The community metaphor--hitched up to a purely humanistic vision and used in its popular sense--does not explain linguistic change, conflict, or marginalization very well. Radical educators have tried to cope with these problems by introducing the notion of resistance into our thinking about *language communities* (Giroux 1988, 1981; Giroux and Aronowitz, 1985; Willis 1977). Composition theorists have tried to revamp the *community* metaphor with the notion of resistance to explain why some writing students do not fare well in composition classrooms. Their texts, despite our efforts, do not measure up. They do not fit. They do not function well in *community*. I have done this myself: I have looked at breakdowns of meaning in terms of resistance and tried to identify different types of resistance to explain breakdowns of meaning in my *language communities*--my composition classrooms (1990).

I would like to suggest today that this recuperation of the *community* metaphor for composition theory through the use of the notion of resistance is not adequate--it simply won't do. I have abandoned both the metaphor of *community* and the notion of resistance to explain why some students do well in composition classrooms and why some do not do well. I have abandoned both notions as

explanations, metaphors, that clarify for my students how language functions in the classroom or in the different academic disciplines. These complementary notions--*community and resistance to community*--obscure more than they clarify. In fact, they can be downright dangerous.

Like many systemic linguists, I am researching the heteroglossic nature of language--the conflictual nature of language--and I have come to realize that tension, conflict, disruption are not just features of language use--but constitutive of meaning itself. Meaning occurs simply because of the tension, the slippage, of different accents, different understandings, different interpretations (Bakhtin 1935). Language is more violent--both theoretically and practically speaking--than a humanistic vision and the popular use of the *community* metaphor often will allow.

Recently, for a semester, I taped and transcribed the interactions in my composition classroom and in student conferences, and then I analyzed the function of language: how language was being used and for what purposes. This course was collaboratively taught: three of us lived through our experience in this classroom as teacher-researchers. We each selected and case-studied one of our 16 students. I chose Katherine, a young woman of Iranian-Macedonian decent. I chose to look at Katherine's language from a systemic linguistic perspective; that is, I studied her language as it functioned within the total language formation of the classroom. To make the project manageable, I focussed on the use of metaphor: Katherine's use of metaphor in relation to communal uses of metaphor in the classroom.

Systemicists carry out their project at three conceptual levels: through micro, intermediate, and macro analyses of language as a system. I looked at Katherine's use of metaphors, how Katherine's metaphors related to the metaphors of other individual students, and Katherine's use of metaphor related to communal metaphors put forth by the group to define the group--especially those put forth by the teachers to define the values and attitudes undergirding the classroom experience.

The theoretical idea undergirding functional linguistics is that language users use the same linguistic resources to shape meaning. But they have a choice: they may not deploy the linguistic resources in the same way. And when they don't there are problems, tensions. I considered this in terms of the deployment of metaphor and, on the basis on my new understandings, I suggest that the tensions I saw were significant enough to merit the reconsideration of the *community* metaphor to explain the dynamics of language-in-use.

At this first level of analysis, I studied grammatical-semantic metaphor in Katherine's language. Grammatical metaphor occurs in instantiations of language that depart from typical ways of structuring language. Now--we are looking at metaphor here in a strictly linguistic sense: how Katherine's utterances depart from literal and typical representations. I looked at how Katherine conceptualized her relationship with her writing peer group: both in real time and in the time of our teacher-student writing conferences. I looked at this in terms of the *ideational* function of language--how Katherine conceptualized the goings-on in her peer group--and in terms of the *interpersonal* function of language--how she choose to express the power relationships within the peer group. It was clear from this delicate analysis that Katherine frequently was conceptualizing herself as person

engaged in a *mental processes*: she saw herself as a knower, a feeler, a senser. "I know it was hard for my peer group," she said. "I think it's just the kind of person I am that's different than the kind of people they are." This kind of language, this conceptualization of self, contrasted significantly from how she perceived her peer group--two women who Katherine viewed as engaged in *material processes*: she saw them as doers, actors. "Make your sentences more correct! Rephrase this," her peer group said to her. Katherine senses; her peers act. In speaking about interpersonal relations within her peer group, Katherine shaped *mood* and *modality* functions in ways that made it clear she perceived her peer group as engaged in power plays with her. They offered imperatives, orders, directions. She offered suggestions and requests. A significant amount of conflict within the peer group arose from this situation. Though it was not obvious to an outsider, the peer group was rendered nearly dysfunctional: at least, for Katherine. This was *heteroglossia*--language conflict--manifested at the clausal level: in terms of the grammatical-semantic shaping of language.

At the second level of analysis--the intermediate level--I considered lexical metaphor in Katherine's texts. Here metaphor means lexicosemantic variation. If, for example, Katherine shapes this utterance--*Hanna* [a peer group member] *likes to play the leader*--she has chosen a less congruent option than in this utterance--*Hanna is the leader*. A metaphoric representation (i.e., less than literal) has been selected. I analyzed 45 pages of transcripts of spoken language and I analyzed many written texts for this kind of metaphorical language which related specifically to how Katherine viewed the "community" (that is, not just the peer group): consciously or not. I categorized such cases thematically and translated them into CONDITIONS or rules for the construction of meaning. I offer here some of the less abstract rules I discovered in Katherine's belief and

value system for how she thought the classroom group should function as a group. She thought, for example:

1. Community is not dramaturgical
2. Community is a measurable commodity: less is better.
3. Community is task-oriented

Now if you'll take a look at the hand-out I've prepared, you'll see these three CONDITIONS listed and the utterances which most succinctly expressed the condition. You may agree with me that in regard to condition:

1. Katherine saw our classroom *community* as overly engaged in role-playing. She views this as less than sincere behavior. She sees a distinction, for example, between cheerfulness and dramatizing cheerfulness for social effect. For Katherine, in genuine *community*, participants are honest.

2. Katherine sees this *community* as viewing talk as commodity. Talk is a thing to be used in the maintenance of roles. If *community* abuses talk, then--for Katherine--less talk is preferable.

3. Clearly, Katherine prioritizes the intellectual work of the *community*. In this *community*, however, she sees social activity as receiving preference over intellectual activity.

These rules or CONDITIONS are somewhat meaningless in themselves. They take on meaning only in relation to other texts that appeared inside and outside of my composition classroom. Thus, I considered a third level--a macro level--of the

use of metaphor. I considered lexicosemantic metaphor as it appeared in communal texts.

The question was: what are the implicit CONDITIONS or rules which the group--not just Katherine--deployed in the construction of meaning? It was clear from this analysis that the rules Katherine operationalized for meaning-making in the classroom were not always in ALIGNMENT with the rules other students and the teachers operationalized. This is a study in intertextuality: how do Katherine's rules for meaning-making either ALIGN with or COLLIDE with the rules of the group? Some of the less abstract rules of the group related to Katherine's rules I call ALTERNATIVE CONDITIONS:

1. Community is dramaturgical.
2. Community is a measurable commodity: more is better.
3. Community is task oriented.

The ALTERNATE CONDITIONS are also listed on this hand-out. From the examples given, you may agree with me that this group of students had ideas about *community* sometimes clearly at odds with Katherine's ideas. With regard to ALTERNATE CONDITION:

1. In contrast to Katherine, these participants enjoy role-playing. Eliot and the professors are on stage. The "out of the ordinary" is ordinary in this *community*: something for which to strive.

2. Like Katherine, some class participants see talk as commodity. Unlike Katherine, they equate it with *community*. The more, the better.

3. Class participants clearly see themselves as task-oriented. Although there is no evidence here, they (unlike Katherine) perhaps see social activity as an integral part of intellectual activity.

The last text on your hand-out is an excerpt from the class syllabus. In this text, you see the one of the dominating metaphors of the classroom was one offered by the teachers. In our unconscious shaping of metaphor, the teachers clearly believed that--with regard to condition 1--*community* was indeed to be perceived as dramaturgical.

I have discovered a short list of these kinds CONDITIONS and ALTERNATE CONDITIONS for the classroom talk and text. Sometimes Katherine's metaphorical representations were quite in line with the metaphors used by the group. Most frequently they were not. The explanation lies, in part, in the historical texts which are also forming intertextual ties with language in the classroom. Katherine brings values and attitudes into the classroom which do not ALIGN with the dominant values of the group: they COLLIDE. Only sometimes do they ALIGN. When they COLLIDE--which they did most frequently--there is trouble. And there was trouble. Katherine was effectively marginalized in my classroom *community*. She herself defined herself as an *outcast*: her texts--both spoken and written--were not well-received in the classroom. It was interesting to note that--in any kind of absolute terms--Katherine's written texts, submitted for collaboratively derived grades, did not significantly diverge from the average text in the classroom. Those texts were, however, received quite differently. Katherine was marginalized. She did not fit the *community* because she was deploying the same set of linguistic resources--metaphors--in ways that did not

mesh neatly with the ways most students were deploying metaphorical uses of language. Classroom members did not need this microanalysis. They assumed she was not using language in appropriate ways.

We've all seen this kind of situation in the classroom. The point I would like to suggest today is this: Katherine's language is not/was not actually aberrant as we had all assumed. In fact, it's more typical than any of us realized. I believe an analysis of anyone's language use in this collective would have yielded up a similar discovery. I also believe we would have realized Katherine's language was not quite so aberrant as we thought if we had not been so much under the influence of the *community* metaphor--with its common language--or the resistance framework we--like the theorists--had posited to explain conflict in communities. Language--in fact--is thoroughly heteroglossic, thoroughly imbued with the conflict, the violence of this kind of colliding. Language is inherently violent at the clausal level of meaning-making. In fact, this tension is what allows for meaning at all. We respond to one another because of the slippage--there would be nothing to say if there were not this kind of slippage.

So, I want to define what did happen in this classroom. I want to move away from the community/resistance dichotomy so current in composition theory and pedagogy today. Katherine is not a resister. To say so--like many who are trying to salvage the *community* metaphor with the notion of resistance do say--is to risk masking the fact of violence in language. We can marginalize more easily: we teachers say there are some students who work well in the *community* and there are some who do not. We say it's in our students best interests to learn the dominant language of the *community*. They must in order to succeed academically. We focus perhaps too much on the common language we think we

use when we are successful participants in a speech group and we neglect one real characteristic of language: it is fraught with disruption and conflict.

I suggest we dispense with the euphemisms. We might teach our students that conflict is constitutive of language and meaning- making: not something to be negotiated, settled by consensus, accepted though aberrant, compromised. It is not something bargained away through the creation of a common language. There are not *community* members and resisters to *community*. Conflict is constitutive, normal, necessary. Conflict explains the dynamism of language. It explains meaning. It is inherent in social groups because of diverse backgrounds, interpretations, meaning-making.

In light of this reflection, I suggest two actions:
one: as teachers, we might begin to conceptualize our classroom groups not as *communities*, but as *collectivities*. The term collectivity is one that makes many of us wince. The political baggage is overwhelming for some: it reminds us, for example, of enforced collectivization. To this, I say fine. For me, the term collectivity captures both the randomness and the politicalness of language in social groups. We might avoid the idealism of the term *community* and point out to our students that the rule of discourse is that it is normally conflictual. In the classroom, we ought to invite our students to see that diversity is not just allowed in our classrooms, it is constitutive. For me, the term *collectivity* facilitates this kind of realization. Collectivity is a *bottom up* metaphor, not a *top down* metaphor like the *community* metaphor. Perhaps Katherine would have had a much easier go of it had everyone in the classroom understood that diversity and conflict was normal, not just accepted.

two: as teacher-researchers, we might begin to actively listen for the metaphors our own students offer to define themselves as a group-in-process. If we actively listen to our students' metaphors, perhaps we can begin to more adequately address their needs. For instance, I have collected metaphors my students shaped to describe themselves as a group-in-process. You'll see some of these on the handout. Some are problematic. Some are encouraging. Most demonstrate that students view the collectivity not as a monolithic structure, but as a location where diversity is recognized: where diversity is constitutive and not simply allowed.

The importance of integrating into our thinking ideas about the inherent diversity, inherent conflict, in the language of social groups extends, I believe, beyond our own composition classrooms, beyond the university. In a world where one faction of the planet--like our recently allied forces--can decide in a matter of months that another faction on the planet--like the Iraqis and its sympathizers--is simply too different to allow it to continue intact, in health, with water and food and medical supplies for its aged, for its women, children, and other innocents, we need this kind of vision.

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KATHERINE'S CONDITIONS:

1. COMMUNITY IS NOT DRAMATURGICAL

a. "Alaine likes to play the leader"

b. "I thought she was just a phony/ always/ you know/ when she would come to class and stuff/ she was really chipper/ and it was kind of sickening"

2. COMMUNITY IS A MEASURABLE COMMODITY: LESS IS BETTER

a. "people fighting to talk/ enough talking/ we talk too much"

b. "she [peer group member] listened to the whole junk"

c. "I didn't have anything she could use"

3. COMMUNITY IS TASK-ORIENTED

a. "half the time I didn't even care about their personal lives/ I didn't want to talk about her escapades/ we were supposed to read the papers/ we were supposed to talk about 'Apropos' [a student text]/ might was well/ that's what we were there for/ you guys [teachers] would think I wasn't doing my work"

ALTERNATE CONDITIONS:

1. COMMUNITY IS DRAMATURGICAL

a. *From a student log:* "Eliot then proceeded to steal the show and tell us about the ways things are at BU. I think Eliot is really on top of things and has a lot going for him. Reminds me of me. Ha! Ha!"

b. *From a teacher log:* "We gathered. The visiting experts took their positions earned with authority at the front of the room."

c. *From a student log:* "It was a nice Tuesday and everybody was in class, one person was late, we won't mention that person's name, and class started out as usual with the prehand discussion on

something out of the ordinary. I didn't get in on the discussion because I arrived when it was just ending, so I can't tell you what the topic was."

2. COMMUNITY IS A MEASURABLE COMMODITY: MORE IS BETTER

a. *From a teacher log:* "She [one of the other teachers] said that one of the points of us all being there was for us all to be participants in the conversation...I was a bit worried at first because I thought that no one was going to ask questions...I was pleased when questions started coming forth."

b. *From a student log:* "Unfortunately, at the time of this discussion I had not yet seen the panel discussion, but I did get much out of the group meeting."

3. COMMU[illegible]TY IS TASK-ORIENTED

a. *From a course reading:* "[In a discourse community] there is some common, public goal the group seeks to accomplish, some work the participants are trying to perform together...The group uses its forum to work toward its goal by providing information and feedback."

b. *From a class log written by a student-leader:* "Noticing that the course ends November 3 may have heightened the intention of the group to orient quickly to the task at hand."

COURSE SYLLABUS

This composition course is designed to initiate conversation about reading and writing as social acts. We will analyze the personal implications of the fact that the meaning of literacy is always shaped by communities which develop guidelines and principles for the making of meaning. Becoming a fully participating member of a new community (for example, the engineering community, the sports medicine community, the comparative literature community, and so forth...) means learning "appropriate" ways of doing, speaking, and writing. It finally must also mean learning to negotiate the limitations of a community's guidelines and rules.

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